
The Authorial voice in Frederick Douglass's My Bondage and My Freedom

Frederick Douglass' second autobiography, *My Bondage, and My Freedom*, significantly revises key portions of his original narrative style and extends the story of his life to include his experiences as a traveling lecturer in the United States as well as England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Douglass also frames his second autobiography differently, replacing the introductory notes by white abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips with profound the prominent black abolitionist Dr. James M'Cune Smith. While the appendix to his first autobiography serves primarily as a clarification about Douglass' views on religion, the appendix to *My Bondage and My Freedom* includes a letter to a former master, Thomas Auld, a ship captain and various excerpts from Douglass' abolitionist lectures. These prefaces and appendices provide the reader with a sense of the larger historical movements in which Douglass plays an important part. Douglass later expanded and republished this autobiography twice more, in 1881 and 1892, both under the title *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

This genre flourished from around 1760 and through the first few decades after the abolition of slavery. One of the most famous examples is the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, but the most famous writer of a slave narrative almost certainly has to be Frederick Douglass. So much did the iconoclastic Douglass have to share about the reality of slavery that *My Bondage and My Freedom* is actually his second publication. The first—and more famous—is his groundbreaking *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*.

Technically, *My Bondage and My Freedom* is considered a revised and expanded version of that original publication in that it serves to update readers on what has occurred in the decade since the earlier narrative was published. These additions are primarily focused on his encounter with racism in the northern states, his activism in the name of abolition, most significantly, his decision to break away from William Lloyd Garrison and the white abolitionist leaders to establish the primacy of the black voice in the call to end slavery. Central to this slave narrative Douglass' frequent expression of his contention that the institutions of slavery corrupts and dehumanizes not just the slave, but the slaveowner and non-slaveholder who condones this practice.

While *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* is much more known, *My Bondage and My Freedom* answered many of the burning questions leftover from the first book. Published in 1855 a decade after narrative, it expanded on many of the most intriguing points of his first book. Remember, both were autobiographies, but as Douglass wrote in his third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, there was only so much information that he could reveal at a given time in hopes of not preventing escape by other runaway slaves.

Like Douglass' earlier narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom* begins with his birth in Tuckahoe, Maryland, but the revised version offers many additional details. In Chapter 1, Douglass remembers his grandmother, Betsey Bailey, at length: "Grandma was. . . all the world to me; and the thought of being separated from her, any considerable time. . . was intolerable". However, when he is around seven years old, his grandmother takes him to live on the

plantation of Colonel Edward Lloyd, and they are indeed separated, leaving young "Fed" with no family except for his brothers and sisters, of whom he notes, "slavery had made us strangers". Douglass acknowledges that "it was sometimes whispered that my master was my father," but he cannot confirm the accuracy of this rumor, for "slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families". In describing his early life on the plantation, Douglass expands the material from the first five chapters of his 1845 Narrative including the death of his mother, descriptions of brutal overseers, and the whipping of Aunt Esther to fill the first nine chapters of *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

In Chapter 10, Douglass describes life in Baltimore with his new master, Hugh Auld, a ship carpenter and brother of Thomas Auld. "I had been treated as a pig on the plantation; I was treated as a child now," he notes, but the "troops of hostile boys" in the streets nevertheless made him wish at times to be back on "the home plantation". When Hugh Auld discovers that his wife, Sophia, is teaching Douglass to read, he insists that she stop immediately, for "[a slave] should know nothing but the will of his master," and literacy "would forever unfit him for the duties of a slave". Douglass hears and understands this message, but Auld's words actually convince him of the crucial importance of literacy: "In learning to read, therefore, I owe quite as much to the opposition of my master, as to the kindly assistance of my amiable mistress". In order to attain literacy, Douglass is "compelled to resort to indirections" such as exchanging bread for reading lessons from hungry white children in the streets of Baltimore. "For a single biscuit," he recalls, "any of my hungry little comrades would give me a lesson more valuable to me than bread".

Chapters 13-20 of *My Bondage and My Freedom* retell the series of relocations and challenges Douglass faces from 1833 (then fifteen years old) through 1838, when he finally escapes from slavery. "One trouble over, and on comes another," Douglass recalls; "The slave's life is full of uncertainty". This particular period of uncertainty begins with the death of Captain Anthony, who, Douglass notes had remained his master "in fact, and in law," though he had become "inform the slave of Master Hugh". Captain Anthony's death necessitates a division of his human "property," and soon afterward, Hugh Auld sends Douglass to work at his brother Thomas Auld's plantation, on Maryland's Eastern Shore. When Master Thomas finds that severe whippings do not cause "any visible improvement in Douglass' character," he hires the young slave out to Edward Covey, who is reputed to be "a first-rate hand at breaking young Negroes".

On January 1, 1834, Douglass sets out for Covey's farm, fearing that "like a wild young working animal, I am to be broken to the yoke of a bitter and life-long bondage". The setting, one of his first assignments is to tame "a pair of unbroken oxen," which Douglass describes as a near-impossible task. The oxen run away, and Covey punishes Douglass harshly. But Douglass does not intend to be broken either, and his year with Covey culminates in a violent fistfight with the overseer. This brutal struggle, Douglass recalls, "rekindled in my breast the smoldering embers of liberty. . . and revived a sense of my own manhood". Douglass emphasizes his victory over Covey as a turning point in the narrative: "This spirit made me a freeman in fact, while I remained a slave in a form". In 1835, Douglass leaves Covey to work for William Freeland, "a well-bred southern gentleman," noting that "he was the best master I ever had until I became my own master". After an uneventful year, Douglass devises his first escape plan, conspiring with five other young male slaves. However, their scheme is detected, Douglass is imprisoned for a time, and finally, Thomas Auld sends him back to live with Hugh.

While working in a Baltimore shipyard as a hired laborer, Douglass is savagely beaten and nearly killed by four white ship carpenters. Nevertheless, the job allows Douglass to save some money, finally enabling him to make his escape in September 1838. Douglass does not reveal the full details of his escape in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, fearing that he might "thereby prevent a brother from suffering from escaping the chains and fetters of slavery". He narrates his escape in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, published well after emancipation. Instead, Douglass skips to his first impressions of life in New York: "less than a week after leaving Baltimore, I was walking amid the hurrying throng, and gazing upon the dazzling wonders of Broadway".

Although the title suggests that Douglass' second autobiography might spend as much time on his "freedom" as it spends on his "bondage," only the last four chapters are devoted to his life as a free man. Chapter 22 details Douglass' marriage to Anna Murray, his move to New Bedford, Massachusetts, his renaming from Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey to Frederick Douglass, and his first encounter with "the mind of William Lloyd Garrison". Chapter 23 relates Douglass' involvement with the American Anti-Slavery Society and describes his original impetus to write down his story "to dispel all doubt about his background and to expose the secrets and crimes of slavery and slaveholders". Chapter 24 describes Douglass' tumultuous Atlantic crossing on a ship full of slave-owners, his exploits as a traveling lecturer in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and the "many dear friends" abroad who collaborate to purchase Douglass's freedom from Thomas Auld in 1846.

Chapter 25 recalls Douglass's plan to start a newspaper after returning to the United States, which he realizes with the help of his "friends in England" despite some unexpected resistance from his abolitionist "friends in Boston". This difference of opinion was emblematic of a larger rift between Douglass and the followers of William Lloyd Garrison over various points of political philosophy. Determined to circulate his newspaper from a neutral location, Douglass begins printing *The North Star* in December 1847 and moves his family to Rochester, New York, in 1848. He concludes *My Bondage and My Freedom* with a revised mission statement: "to promote the moral, social, religious, and intellectual elevation of the free colored people. . . to advocate the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race".

Douglass encountered a different brand of opposition within the ranks of the Anti Slavery Society itself. He was one of only a few black men employed by the mostly white society, and the society's leaders, including Garrison, would often condescendingly insist that Douglass merely relate the "facts" of his experience, and leave the philosophy, rhetoric, and persuasive argument to others. Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* can be seen as a response to both of these types of opposition. The *Narrative* pointedly states that Douglass is its sole author, and it contains two prefaces from Garrison and another abolitionist, Wendell Phillips, to attest to this fact. Douglass's use of the true names of people and places further silenced his detractors who questioned the truthfulness of his story and status as a former slave. Additionally, the *Narrative* undertook to be not only a personal account of Douglass's experiences as a slave but also an eloquent anti-slavery treatise. With the narrative, Douglass demonstrated his ability to be not only the teller of his story but its interpreter as well. Because Douglass did use real names in his *Narrative*, he had to flee the United States for a time, as his Maryland "owner" was legally entitled to track him down in Massachusetts and reclaim him. Douglass spent the next two years traveling in the British Isles, where he was warmly received. He returned to the United States only after two English friends

purchased his freedom. His reputation at home had grown during his absence. The Narrative was an instant bestseller in 1845 and went through five print runs to accommodate demand. Despite opposition from Garrison, Douglass started his own abolitionist newspaper in 1847 in Rochester, New York, under the name North Star.

Douglass continued to write and lecture against slavery and also devoted attention to the women's rights movement. He became involved in politics, to the disapproval of other abolitionists who avoided politics for ideological reasons. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Douglass campaigned first to make it the aim of the war to abolish slavery and then to allow black men to fight for the Union. He was successful on both fronts: Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on December 31, 1862, and Congress authorized the enlistment of black men in 1863, though they were paid only half what white soldiers made. The Union won the Civil War on April 9, 1865.

During the 1860s and beyond, Douglass continued to campaign, now for the right of blacks to vote and receive equal treatment in public places. Douglass served in government positions under several administrations in the 1870s and 1880s. He also found time to publish the third volume of his autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, in 1881 (the second volume, *My Bondage, and My Freedom*, was published in 1855). In 1882, Douglass's wife, Anna, died. He remarried, to Helen Pitts, a white advocate of the women's movement, in 1884. Douglass died of a heart attack in 1895.

Until the 1960s, Douglass's Narrative was largely ignored by critics and historians, who focused instead on the speeches for which Douglass was primarily known. Yet Douglass's talent clearly extended to the written word. His Narrative emerged in a popular tradition of slave narratives and slavery fictions that includes Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Douglass's work is read today as one of the finest examples of the slave-narrative genre. Douglass co-opted narrative styles and forms from the spiritual conversion narrative, the sentimental novel, oratorical rhetoric, and heroic fiction. He took advantage of the popularity of slave narratives while expanding the possibilities of those narratives. Finally, in its somewhat unique depiction of slavery as an assault on selfhood and in its attention to the tensions of becoming an individual, Douglass's Narrative can be read as a contribution to the literary tradition of American Romantic individualism.